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HOUSEHOLD CALENDAR

Buying Quality in Sheets and Pillowcases

A radio talk by Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Tuesday, November 28, 1933.

How do you do, Everybody:

Before I start the business of the day, let me wish you good luck on your Thanksgiving turkeys. The typewriters have been clicking all around me the last few days getting the directions for stuffing and roasting a turkey addressed and off to you. And I've certainly enjoyed reading the messages on your cards. I hope the librarian up in Michigan, who listens to the Farm and Home Hour as she eats her lunch, will be able to help out every bride who comes into the library to get directions for cooking her first turkey.

Now, today I'm going to pass on to you some facts about quality in sheets and pillowcases from our textile division. There are lots of alluring advertisements in the papers these days urging us to stock up on household linens and bedding. And of course we all love a bargain when it is a bargain. But there's the rub. Unless we can get some real facts about the fabrics themselves, so that we can estimate wearing quality in relation to price, we may find we've lost money on our "bargains," so called.

Some sweet day perhaps every sheet and pillowcase on sale in the stores will bear a label giving facts about the quality of the fabric. And by that I don't mean catch phrases like "superfine cotton" or "the best sheet made." I mean exact facts and figures about tensile strength, thread count, the amount of sizing in the fabric, whether the sheet is a "first" or a "second" according to good textile standards, and the weight of the cloth per square yard. Labels like this would give satisfaction to everybody I believe--to the textile manufacturer, to the retail storekeeper, and certainly to the consumer. There would be a clearer understanding all around. There's nothing revolutionary about the idea. Large hotels and hospitals and Government institutions all purchase their sheets and pillowcases now by specifications. That is, they set their standards for tensile strength, and thread count, and so on, and they buy only sheets that meet this standard. If it pays these large-scale buyers to insist on quality, seems to me it stands to reason that it would pay us householders to buy by quality, not by price and what few facts we can glean from the store clerk.

As you've probably noticed, a few cotton mills are already giving the thread count on their sheets. That means the number of warp yarns per inch and the number of filling yarns per inch. For a muslin sheet satisfactory for everyday home use, the thread count ranges around 66 to 76 each way of the cloth. If you see a sheet with a thread count below 60, you can be pretty sure it is coarse and sleazy. With percale sheets, which have a fine texture, the thread count runs up much higher, to 90 or above. If you can't get any figures on thread count, make it a point to hold the sheeting up between yourself and a strong light. You can get some idea of the balance and evenness of the weave.

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To find tensile strength of a fabric a textile expert puts a sample of the cloth into a machine built for the purpose and finds out the number of pounds required to break that fabric. So tensile strength is sometimes called breaking strength. It's a measure of quality. So far I've been able to find the tensile strength given on only a very, very few sheets sold at retail, but I'm going to keep on letting the stores know I want it. And for the present I can judge the strength of the fabric a little by pulling it between the hands and noticing whether the yarns slip out of place easily or stay put.

The amount of sizing in sheeting is also important to wearing quality. To make a fabric smooth and soft the manufacturer uses starch and other materials in the finish. If he uses the minimum amount of sizing, the sheeting is called "pure finish." You've probably seen "pure finish" featured in sheet advertisements. It is a mark of good quality. But if there's nothing about sizing on the label, then rub a corner of the fabric briskly between the hands. Or if you are buying sheeting by the yard, take home a sample and wash it and see whether much sizing comes out.

You'll find the length and width clearly marked on all sheets. But remember the length given is the length before the hems were turned, not the length of the finished sheets. Also remember sheets may shrink 5 inches or more in laundering. For the average bed a sheet 99, or better still, 108 inches long allows for good tuckins under the mattress at top and bottom and for shrinkage. Is there anything more annoying than I don't know it than to wake up in the middle of the night and find your toes sticking out because the sheet was too short to stay tucked in securely. Personally, I'm strong for the 108 inch sheet.

Another point in buying sheets -- be sure to find out whether the sheeting was torn or cut before the hems were turned. If it was torn, then the hems run true with the thread of the good and they'll iron straight and flat. If the sheeting was cut from the bolt, it will pull out of shape when it's washed. Many sheets are now labeled "torn length". The other day I saw some sheets on sale with colored hems, and they looked very attractive on the bargain table. When I looked at them more closely I say that though the hems were straight, they were hemstitched on to cut sheets with the thread of the goods running all skew-gee. What a disappointment they'd be after the first washing. And by the way, whenever you buy sheets with colored hems or sheets made entirely of colored fabric, be sure that you get a color-fast guarantee.

I haven't covered all the points on buying sheets by any means. If you want facts you can refer to later, write me and I'll list your name to receive a leaflet that we are printing. We hope it will be out in time to help with Christmas shipping, for I hear that many people are going to give very practical gifts this year, like sheets and towels and table linen and blankets.

Goodbye, for this time.